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SUBJECT: Media Reaction: Admiral Fallons's Visit to
Bangladesh;Dhaka

Admiral Fallon's Visit to Bangladesh

Summary: "The Daily Star" op-ed says that there is no reason to question the veracity of Admiral Fallon's statement, since, one would like to believe, it stems from very sound intelligence. If what the Admiral has said is based on specific information, then perhaps all the speculation regarding the presence of terrorist groups in Bangladesh be proven correct.

The following are excerpts from the op-ed article:

"Pacific Commander's Expos"

Independent English language newspaper "The Daily Star" op-ed by security expert Brigadier General (retired) Shahedul Alam Khan opines (4/21):

It seems that everybody except the relevant persons in Bangladesh has indubitable intelligence on the doings of the militants in this country, that have turned, or are in the process of turning, Bangladesh into a hotbed of terrorism and a safe haven for terrorists. And, all that is happening in our neighboring country, or that is going to happen in the future years, related particularly to its security in its Northeast, is being planned and fomented by extremists housed in Bangladesh.

Now we have the Chief of the Pacific theatre of the U.S. Military Command reveal in no uncertain manner that international terrorist organizations are active in Bangladesh. There is no reason to question the veracity of his statement, since, one would like to believe, it stems from very sound intelligence. And, if what the Admiral has said is based on reports and specific information, then perhaps all the speculations regarding the presence of terrorist groups in Bangladesh will have been proven correct. Although the U.S. admiral was very careful not to attribute religious label to the terrorist group or groups, it is a safe guess that it is Islamic terrorists he was referring to. It is quite natural for the Americans to be concerned at this development. And so must we in Bangladesh also be, if what the U.S. admiral said is an accurate representation of the facts on ground.

But is there anything new in the Admiral's remarks?

Absolutely nothing, to be frank. That Bangladesh has become a convenient route of transit of both illegal weapons and drugs, that complement each other, is a well-established fact. It does not need a Mahan or Mackinder to determine the likely destination of these weapons. And, even the most uninformed would not suggest that these were smuggled in to be used as agricultural inputs. However, merely being a conduit does not necessarily make a country a suitable operational area for international terrorists with an agenda to implement or a message to convey, for that is what terrorism has come to be now, a way of expression, vile that may be. Of course there is hardly any doubt that many of the illegal weapons meant for other destinations have found their way into the hands of local criminal.

Nobody will take issue with the admiral's general formulation regarding the whys and wherefores of terrorism; i.e. why does the phenomenon emerge after all. Given the current divisiveness in our society and the flux that we are encountering, one can say, even at the risk of being labeled a heretic, that terrorism may well become a mode of expression, unless we wake up and take notice of the developments in and around us.

Apparently, acts of terrorism in Bangladesh have been limited to bomb attacks that have taken more than 150 lives. No one has claimed responsibility for these acts. This is not quite the way of the hard core terrorists, whose first objective is to announce their presence and their political and religious agenda by taking credit for acts of damage and destruction perpetrated primarily on innocent civilians, such as those we have seen committed in Bangladesh, particularly in the last two or three years.

None of the government investigations into these incidents has been made public, and we are not to know whether the government has any definitive information on the presence of

terrorist groups in Bangladesh. However, if one were to take the Foreign Minister's remarks to be factual, there are no such groups in Bangladesh with trans-border linkages. In this context, I can hardly resist quoting a portion of yesterday's Daily Star editorial, which the government should do well to consider while addressing the issue. It says: "We ought to keep in mind that the thread of international terrorism in our part of the world runs right across the Middle East to South East Asia. One must not, therefore, discard out of hand the possibility of its tentacles existing in Bangladesh, without a serious investigation into the matter. We are not sure whether that has been done with any seriousness."

That there has been no classical terrorist activity in Bangladesh does not mean that there are no latent groups waiting for an opportune moment to spring into action. And there are perhaps telltale signs that are clear enough to compel action on the part of the government.

Thus, the U.S. offer of cooperation to address the issue must be viewed objectively. It would however not be wrong to suggest that the remarks of our Foreign Minister, whose first reaction, according to press reports, was that the issue of terrorism did not come up for discussion at all, yet in the same breath said that Bangladesh would not countenance the growth of terrorism in its territory, is demonstrative of the denial syndrome of our government insofar as it relates to this sensitive issue.

It may be that the Admiral has left more things unsaid than what he has said. What we would like of the U.S. government is to share with the Bangladesh government information regarding the presence and operation of terrorist groups on our soil. We should not be satisfied with statements that merely restate what is already known. Tangible evidence must come forth so that concrete action can be implemented.

It is just not enough to merely proscribe parties or groups suspected of links with international terrorism. Effective action must be taken not only to render these groups ineffective and incapable of cooperating with outside agencies in fulfilling their agenda, whatever that might be, but also to prevent germination of such elements in our country in the first place.

Thomas